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Economy will put energy help to a test

Today's Topic: Heating bills face cold reality

Our View

The most telling aspect of what is happening with people seeking help in paying their utility bills is that the agencies are seeing people for the first time.

The need for assistance with home utility bills is likely to be twice what it was last year, according to Metro officials. The economy is bad. The weather is getting cooler. Anyone can see the hardship that could be coming. So programs that help people keep their homes warm in the winter play an even more important role than before.

On one hand, Nashville is fortunate that funding for the state for the purpose of helping with utilities has been increased. But the other side of the story is that the Nashville agency that handles such matters, the Metro Action Commission, is seeing demand rise.

The state will receive \$80.5 million for such assistance through federal funding under the Low Income Energy Assistance Program, a significant increase over previous allocations. The state has 19 agencies handling such services, the Metro Action Commission one of them.

In order to qualify for the help, families must live at or below 125 percent of the federal poverty level, which is an income of roughly \$26,500 for a family of four.

Thus far this year, a lot of the desperation expressed over energy bills has been people with gas-guzzlers moaning about prices at the pump, or people making the monumental decision of taking a "staycation," where they didn't go quite as far as normal for their vacation spending. Families who must turn to agencies to help keep their homes warm in the winter would love to have such problems.

The economic picture does not look promising. The nation may be in for a very long, difficult road. So it is important to be mindful that many people will qualify for the most fundamental of needs, like warmth in their homes to protect them from the weather. Those households include children who had nothing to do with creating their economic circumstances. This is one of those aspects of government where people can say responsible federal representatives recognized what was ahead and acted. The increase in funding is necessary. With agencies already seeing people asking for help who have never asked before, that's a foreboding sign.

The nation is likely to see real-life hardships play out in painful ways. Already, many Americans on fixed incomes are making choices between food and medicine. Heating the home shouldn't be a third item on that list.

It's not as though people visit the agencies and line up for cash. The help comes in the form of payment to a utility company. Electric bills have gone up recently anyway. For many people, the most crucial bill they see in the winter is their credit card statement. But for others, it's the horror of what it costs to keep the home warm.

These are times and conditions when the city, the state and the nation find out just how much it cares

about people with the most basic needs. The \$80.5 million is reason for hope. But part of the hope is that it lasts.
